

"... A commander must view his area of operations as an indivisible entity."

—MCWP 5-1, Marine Corps Planning Process

The Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) fights a single battle within its assigned area of operations (AO). This approach allows the commander to focus the efforts of all elements of the force toward mission accomplishment. This single-battle concept, along with top-down planning and integrated planning, comprise the tenets of the Marine Corps Planning Process that are derived from our maneuver warfare doctrine. Within the single-battle, the commander conducts centralized planning while fostering decentralized execution allowing subordinates to exercise disciplined initiative and exploit opportunities. Centralized planning is essential in controlling and coordinating the efforts of all available forces. Decentralized execution is essential to generate the tempo of operations required to cope with the uncertainty, disorder, and fluidity of combat. The challenge to commanders and staffs is to walk the fine line between over-centralizing operations thus stifling subordinates initiative or decentralizing execution to the point that the MAGTF fails to achieve unity of effort.

A commander must always view his AO as an indivisible entity—operations or activity in any area of the AO have profound, and often unintended, consequences on other areas or events. For example, if the commander has planned to achieve a decision in the close battle, an enemy attack on an airbase in the rear area could affect the ability to conduct shaping operations in the deep area that in turn could ultimately affect the ability to achieve a favorable decision in the close fight. It is the role of the commander, through his staff and subordinate commanders, to orchestrate the actions of the forces under his command in a way that maximizes their collective strengths in accomplishing his assigned tasks.

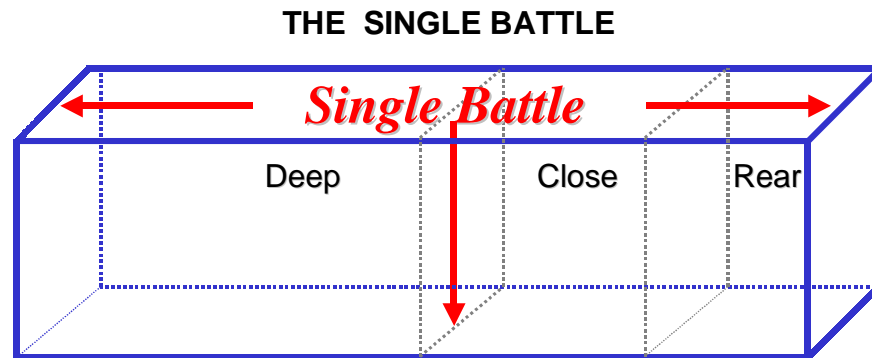
Often, however, planners and subordinate commanders are not provided the commander's operational design—his conceptual framework of the operation. As a result, functional and detailed plans and subordinate tasks are developed in a piecemeal fashion. The success of the operation often depends on the tenacity and initiative of the individual Marine rather than the cohesiveness of the plan.

The tools available to the commander for providing his operational design to his subordinates and staff are his intent and planning guidance. The underlying purpose of the operation, as expressed in the commander's intent, serves to focus the activities of the force. In order to understand the interaction of the various elements of the force, the commander should conceptualize the shaping, decisive, and sustaining actions necessary to achieve his intent. Likewise, the commander will divide his force into a main and any number of supporting efforts.

The main effort is the unit the commander plans to conduct the decisive action by attacking the enemy center of gravity through the enemy's critical vulnerabilities. It should be appropriately weighted with the necessary combat power to accomplish the decisive action. The main effort may, however, shift during an operation. All activities conducted within the battlespace must support, directly or indirectly, the main effort. To achieve the necessary synergy between these related activities, the concepts of maneuver, fires, intelligence, and support should be in development throughout the planning process and support the overall concept of operations. This is not, however, always the case. Sometimes the preparation of these supporting concepts is delegated to the various staff sections where they are developed in a stove-piped fashion. Consequently they are not mutually supporting.

The commander will also conceptually divide his battlespace into deep, close and rear areas. This battlespace geometry is not intended to infer purely geographical areas; rather it serves to characterize the functionally distinct operations that take place within each. Operations in each of these areas either accomplish tasks assigned to the force or increase the effectiveness of those tasks when they do occur.

Neither does this division of the battlespace relieve the commander of the responsibility to focus these functional activities into a unified effort. The commander may decentralize execution but must maintain overall control of operations.



The MAGTF single battle:

- Promotes unity of effort.
- Centralized planning controls and coordinates efforts of all available forces.
- Decentralized execution generates tempo.

Figure 1

The deep area is generally associated with shaping actions—those actions designed to set the conditions for decisive action. The commander may use his long-range fire support systems to conduct lethal shaping actions. Information operations and reconnaissance, surveillance, and target acquisition forces also play a vital role in the nonlethal shaping actions throughout the battlespace. These actions should be viewed as enabling the conduct of the close battle and associated decisive action. Too often activity in the deep area is not focused; with resources expended that might be better used elsewhere. Actions are conducted without adequate analysis of their effect—intended or unintended—or regard for the consequences the actions may have across all the warfighting functions. The commander and his staff must ensure that all actions are undertaken with the understanding of how they inter-relate with the other activity of the force.

Close operations project power against enemy forces in immediate contact and are often the decisive action. Close operations are usually characterized by the use of combined arms in conjunction with maneuver, and normally involve operations by the main effort. The commander will task-organize and provide appropriate assets and priorities of support to the force to ensure it can accomplish its assigned tasks. Supporting efforts are prioritized in order to ensure success of the main effort. He may accept risk in other areas of the battlespace in this bid to be decisive. This risk is based on the commander's understanding of the capabilities of his force, the battlespace, the enemy, and the interaction of all these elements. While the execution of the close battle is often decentralized to the ground combat element, the force commander, through his centralized, top-down planning effort maintains the overall control of the MAGTF single battle.

Actions within the rear area are diverse and range from administrative base functions to combat operations. Rear area operations ensure freedom of action of the force in the deep and close battles by providing an uninterrupted flow of support to the forces operating in those areas. In that sense they can be considered essential shaping actions as the logistical posture of the force will be critical to any follow-on actions. Security of this sustainment flow is critical to the success of the force so the commander must provide sufficient resources to those elements conducting operations in the rear area. The commander must remain cognizant of the ability of his rear area forces to support deep operations that shape the battlespace and set conditions for decisive action.

MARINE CORPS GAZETTE ARTICLE #9, FIGHTING THE SINGLE BATTLE

Properly applied, the tenet of single-battle serves as a powerful tool for commanders to harness the full capabilities of the MAGTF throughout the depth of the AO. The commander's visualization of the inter-relationship between the diverse, yet indivisible, aspects of deep, close, and rear operations allows him to effectively assign tasks, organize his force, and provide assets and priorities of support to his subordinate commanders to generate sufficient combat power at the time and place of his choosing. In keeping with the Marine Corps doctrine of maneuver warfare, the tenet of single-battle provides the commander with unity of effort and the flexibility to meet the challenges of high tempo, fluidity, and disorder found on the battlefield.